

Sandino's example for today

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Date: 1995/04/14

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newsgroups: misc.activism.progressive

/** reg.carib: 198.0 **/

** Topic: Sandino's example for today **

** Written 10:02 PM Apr 3, 1995 by ax:animax in cdp:reg.carib **

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Subject: Sandino's example for today

/* Written 9:44 pm Apr 3, 1995 by animax in ax:ax.amlatina */

/* ----- "Sandino's example for today" ----- */

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Subject: Sandino's example for today

/* Written 9:41 pm Apr 3, 1995 by animax in ax:carnet.nicanew */

/* ----- "Sandino's example for today" ----- */

The following speech -- A Sandinista Commemoration of the Sandino Centennial -- by Alejandro Bendaña -- was given as a contribution to an ongoing debate among Sandinistas about the significance of Sandino's struggle and ideas for addressing current problems in Nicaragua, the Central American region, and more broadly, Latin America. It is being distributed by the Managua-based Center for International Studies [Centro de Estudios Internacionales--CEI] whose director is Bendaña. The speech may be reproduced with the proviso that credit be given to Alejandro Bendaña and the Center for International Studies. The CEI can be contacted at the addresses given in the last endnote to the speech.

A SANDINISTA COMMEMORATION OF THE SANDINO CENTENNIAL

SPEECH GIVEN BY ALEJANDRO BENDANA TO THE COMMEMORATION OF THE 61 ANNIVERSARY OF THE DEATH OF GENERAL SANDINO, HELD IN MANAGUA'S OLAF PALME CONVENTION CENTER, FEBRUARY 21, 1995 (1)

We have to weigh carefully what a national commemoration for Sandino means. There's a lot for all Nicaraguans regardless of political distinction to celebrate this year -- the symbol of Sandino, his example of boldness and courage, his unwavering patriotism, his place as a national hero, his capacity to create and instill faith in the cause of national sovereignty. Backed by this faith and moral strength he, like David, stood up to the invaders. He personified the dignity of Nicaragua.

Thus one does not have to be a Sandinista to commemorate Sandino, to feel and to demand respect for Sandino, to recall those poor courageous men and women soldiers who remained loyal to him through years of hardship, bombardment, and cold in the mountains of the Segovias.

How could we not but be proud of a patriot who was able to capture the imagination and respect of the new Latin American generation of his time, meriting recognition from the people and the international intellectual community, the United States included? Sandino and his crazy little army (2) made Nicaragua shine. For the first time the name of Nicaragua became intertwined with that of Sandino in the imagination and hearts of so many aware citizens in so many places around the world.

Sandino lives on in us. Because whenever Nicaraguans feel external imposition or humiliation, racism or scorn, the sacking of our wealth, underestimation of our abilities, Sandino surges forth, the Sandino we all carry inside us whether or not we call ourselves Sandinista. And as long as this is so there will be hope for Sandino's homeland.

Nonetheless I want to address myself to my Sandinista brothers and sisters as just one more Sandinista, one who has had the privilege of being able to spend time studying Sandino. Because even though we can call on all Nicaraguans to respect the symbol of Sandino something more is expected of those worthy of calling ourselves Sandinistas: loyalty to Sandino's thought.

That's not easy. First, because Sandino was no arm-chair thinker or "intellectual". We were not left with neatly printed volumes of speeches, articles, essays or philosophical disquisitions. This individual who never completed secondary school made an extraordinary effort to develop his own world outlook. We can't say that he managed to articulate a pure ideology or philosophy of his own. And this is not a criticism; rather this is characteristic of the great leaders throughout history who perhaps would never have become leaders had they tried to achieve theoretical perfection.

Hence we are able to capture Sandino's thought through his revolutionary action, not just through the intellect and reason but also through heart and mystique. We assimilate it in part in the same way that the people of the Segovias who were barely literate and in their majority did not know the General personally, but who were able to interpret and inherit the Sandinista mystique.

Mystique is not the same as mysticism; Sandino's ideas were rationally based. It was Sandino who brought to Nicaragua the most advanced and revolutionary social ideas of that epoch, tailoring them to suit Nicaraguan reality. He had assimilated them in Mexico during the Mexican revolution, not in literary salons or in universities, but as a mechanic in oil fields owned by U.S. firms; an organized worker who got a political education in syndicalist ideology, also known as anarchosyndicalism, libertarian socialism, or rational communism.

This ideology was framed in the ethnic pride so characteristic of the Mexican Revolution and this new generation of Latin Americans.

In June 1927, just days before attacking Ocotal, Sandino wrote the following to the political chief of this locality: "I praise the day I emigrated to a country where I could imbibe new ideas to quench my thirst for learning; I tempered my unquestionable spirit with a sentiment of love for the homeland. I wouldn't want to tell you that I went to Europe to find a hero's school to learn how they are made because, my good friend, we are convinced that heroes are made offhand by circumstances of the moment and always arise from our people in their majority of the Indo-hispanic race."

"That's a good definition of Sandinismo: grassroots' ability to improvise heroes. But since this capacity stems from inspiration, the enemies of the people had to get rid of the inspiration as well as Sandino, of the thought as well as the thinker, time and time again over the last six decades. The first Somoza killed Sandino and then destroyed the archive of the Eje'rcito Defensor de la Soberania Nacional de Nicaragua. Sandino called this archive his "moral treasure". Trying to kill him again, Somoza Garci'a ordered the writing of that anti-Sandinista diatribe "El Calvario de las Segovias"; likewise Somoza Debayle in 1976 ordered a re-edition of the same book in yet another effort to assassinate the Sandino legacy which remained alive and combative in the organized force of the Sandinista Front.

Herein lies, in effect, the wisdom of Carlos Fonseca who always insisted on the necessity of studying Sandino. Fonseca showed and shows us that "Sandino's inexhaustible patriotic and revolutionary spring helps us at times to derive rich political lessons."

Patriot and revolutionary. Let's reflect upon the inseparability of those two conditions, for here too is the essence of Sandinismo. This is why Sandino must form a part of the analysis and action of the Sandinistas demanded by the new stage Nicaragua is now going through. In Carlos' time, as in ours, reflecting upon historical tradition was an unavoidable task. Concretely we have to nourish ourselves theoretically and ideologically from Sandino's work, reconstructing the originality of his thought, now counting on new documentation about Sandino (that Carlos did not have), but also posing new questions.

For Sandinistas then it is not a matter of commemorating Sandino for nostalgia, nor out of yearning or obligatory anniversary observance. We invoke Sandino out of the necessity to find ways to better position ourselves in face of the neoliberal onslaught and the crisis on the left. We turn to Sandino because we lack an understanding of the present. Lack of a vision of the future often arises from ignorance of the past. In the past lie the roots that enable the Sandinista *tayaca'n* [sturdy, towering oak] to resist today's passing storms and to grow in the future.

But it is also through the present that we return to discover the past. If we think about the history of Sandinismo in the light of Sandino, but also in light of the failure of the state socialist model and of the neoliberal capitalist model we will not find in Sandino's thought recipes nor precise programs for the future, but rather guidelines. Sandino used his indispensable humanist and patriotic perspective to develop a criticism of both capitalist dehumanization and of the authoritarian socialist model. And he did this with a socialist conviction of which there can be no doubt and about which he spoke on a number of occasions. This conviction runs through the analysis and strategy that Sandino developed for his struggle and that is how he located his struggle in universal history.

Sandino's social radicalism did not come from Moscow but from Mexico; it came not from text books and volumes but from his condition as a worker and mestizo eager for knowledge, as a member of the oil workers' union, perhaps the most radicalized labor union in Latin America. He was greatly influenced by the libertarian socialism of the anarcho-syndicalists that basically accepted the Marxist analysis of history and of capital. This political current is characteristically not a doctrine but rather an attitude, far removed from canonized and codified prescriptions about party and state.

Sandino never hid his anti-imperialist conviction nor his faith in the leading role of the working class. His outlook is national, but begins with the interests and needs of the popular class, the majority of the country. He never ever said that only bureaucrats and the enlightened would go all the way to the end (3).

We have to shield Sandino from those who would split the individual from his revolutionary convictions. But we should first ask ourselves if we, the Sandinista Front have been loyal to Sandino's thought. It's not enough to just call ourselves socialists; we should think about the socialism of Sandino who always venerated individual liberty. We should recall that Sandino kept his distance from any political project of the left or right that counterposed the state or political parties to freedom of expression and the individual's free development. His socialism is as far away from the dictatorship of the proletariat as from the dictatorship of capital, as opposed to the plutocracy as to party-bureaucratic rule. His socialism never lent itself to anticommunism but also never made apologies for left authoritarianism, even breaking from the official Communist movement when it insisted on imposing its line.

Sandino did not accept mechanical models imported from other latitudes. He assimilated what he would from others but was incessant in his demand for self-determination and individual liberty in the most diverse fields from economic self-management to political federalism, together with faith in the indigenous-campesino culture as an emancipatory instrument; and faith in collective property as a higher form of socio-economic organization.

At the same time Sandino respected and defended small proprietors and small capital, including foreign capital. None of this is incompatible with his outlook and popular project nor with his class commitment. All that he asked is

respect for the dignity of the nation and of the worker. For example on April 29, 1928 Sandino ordered the burning of the Luz y Los Angeles mine, property of U.S. investors. But he took the trouble to write to the manager that "we will appreciate and respect capitalists in so far they treat us as equals and not incorrectly as they now do, believing themselves to be masters and lords over our lives and interests."

Patriots from other social backgrounds were not excluded from the popular struggle. Sandino spoke of his brothers of the homeland, of the great Nicaraguan family. On October 1, 1932 Sandino sent what he called his "Circular to all our authorities" (who were both civilians and military personnel) in which he explains with enormous simplicity and wisdom: "keep in mind that it is the coming together of many families with different surnames in one region that forms what is called a country: our Country, for example, is called Nicaragua...the President of the Republic is a servant of the people and is neither master nor boss." Nationalism and patriotism for Sandino means that Nicaragua's national identity is either based on democracy or it is neither national nor patriotic.

But there is another dimension to Sandino's socialism that must be emphasized because in the past we Sandinistas did not always know how to appreciate or practice it. We refer to the presence of spirituality, ethics and morals in Sandino's struggle and thought.

For Sandino emancipation is also spiritual and ethical. As a youth he undertook the search for truth which would explain the reason for his and others' suffering. He was trying to understand, as he said, "the most profound relationship between things, reading everything that in my judgement is moral and instructive." In effect Sandino delved deeply into the field of philosophy always trying to go beyond himself, to find the meaning of life.

Among those who knew him it was said that Sandino had "a lot of Trotsky and something of Saint Francis of Assisi in him." A U.S. journalist commented that "There is something religious in this man's ideology." Another who interviewed him noted that "The impression given by General Sandino, both in his manner and his conversation is one of great spiritual loftiness." Another said "General Augusto Cesar Sandino is not psychologically a caudillo.

He has more the profile of an apostle. He is someone convinced who persuades. He is not a believer who imposes."

The vast majority of EDSNN members never got to know Sandino in person but were loyal to the death, seeing in him not just a military leader but also a spiritual teacher. Sandino's words reached the troops in regular communiques written from Headquarters. In a letter written from el Chipote to Colonel Ine'z Herna'ndez Go'mez and Sergeant Major Ladislao Palacios of the Second EDSNN Detachment he told them: "Our conscience must be our best adviser and for that reason it would be good to think, if only once a week, about all the

good and the bad we have done and look at how things can develop so that we can avoid setting out on the wrong foot and falling into an abyss."

Frequent references to God are found in his words; some are the same as our people repeat: "God has charge over our lives", "God will lead me to you safely", "We'll make it, God willing", "God and the mountains are our allies". All this counterposed to what he called the "God of gold" so worshipped by Wall Street bankers, the U.S. Marines, and those who sell out their country.

For Sandino politics cannot be separated from faith nor from ethics. One leads to the other. Sandino believed in God and in Jesus, but considered himself neither Catholic nor Protestant. He well understood that a revolution is always religious even if it proclaims itself atheist. He understood that there can be no conscience without science, but neither can there be science without conscience because that would be the ruin of the soul, as Rabelais said.

Sandino had faith not in institutionalized religion but in a religion that responds to the spiritual need of each person and of a people; in the redemption of man, woman, and society through the strength of God that he called Love, that he called Divine Justice, and that is implacable. Liberation stems not from divine inspiration nor the appearance of some Messiah, but from conscience. Sandino explained this to his troops: "There is no lack of redeemers, the individual is capable of self-redemption on his own."

For Sandino the country's liberation comes about through the liberation of the individual, through abandoning vices, through love for the community that is also identification with other people in struggle. Face to face with life, Sandino exalted the importance of personal energy, of faith, optimism, will, of ethical conscience, of youth and new generations: in a word, the revolutionary mystique. Sandinismo thus entails the possibility of moral, spiritual, and material betterment.

That's why Sandino didn't see withdrawal of U.S. Marines as the end of his struggle. He insisted on libertarian values. He was not fixated on armed struggle. In 1933 he began to organize cooperatives; he was obsessed with peace to the point of taking risks that led him to fall into the mortal trap set by Somoza. "We have to keep on fighting," he said, "albeit by other means."

His struggle was not simply against foreign intervention or the national guard, but against the hypocrisy of those who use moral, religious, patriotic, cultural, and traditional values to cover up antinational class privilege linked to the imperial power. But neither did he resort to demagoguery or mystification in this struggle, but rather kept his sights on the building of new men and women in a new country -- one cannot be understood without the other -- with true equality of moral and material opportunities for all Nicaraguans, not just for the few. This Nicaraguan socialism was created heroically in its own language and in the reality of dispossessed Nicaraguans, depriving the right of their claimed monopoly of the values of country, family, and spirituality.

For Sandino the "vende patrias" [those who sell out their country] and the national agents of U.S. military and financial power could not be true Nicaraguans nor true believers in God. What then would he have said of los vende-Telcor [those now attempting to sell off the publicly-owned telephone, telegraph, and mail service--translator's note] and of those Nicaraguans who shield themselves behind external powers in order to impose their privileges, of the assault on the workers of the Fosforera [match] plant to please citizens of other countries, of those who invoke the need to bow down to the God of Gold even though this means surrendering the country's economic management and patrimony?

Sandino remains our path. He aimed at and points to the possibility of a new, ethical, humanitarian, Nicaraguan socialism that is at once universal. He left us the challenge to build a political movement that goes beyond the limits of both authoritarian socialism and social democracy, not to mention savage capitalism. In this task he placed himself alongside the people, taking from them and interpreting political and grassroots spiritual reflection. He responded to the demand for coherence and authenticity that took the place of fleeting or electoral agreements.

To be Sandinista demands taking a critical outlook on the past but also taking inspiration from it in order to construct a common view of the future, the Sandinismo of the future that can respond to this thirst for community, for transformation and for a vision of the future. Neither the suffering of the people nor the radical nature of the prevailing regime allows for wishy-washy or elitist proposals. We have to block the dehumanization of politics and take no part in such a process.

In this unequal battle the historic memory of a Sandino stands as an indispensable arm to confront those dangers in the same way that Sandino invoked Benjamín Zeledón. It's true that Sandinista identity cannot be exclusively based in symbols from the past but neither is it a question of wiping the slate clean and starting over. Because ideas and blood cannot be erased; they constitute an indispensable light to deepen our understanding of the Sandinista path.

Some would rather adapt themselves and be known just as opposition movements. They should be respected just as Sandino could respect those who did not think as he did but who knew how to show their patriotic concern. But they cannot be Sandinistas for the simple reason that without Sandino there is no Sandinismo, much less Sandinista renovation. The left without socialism is a declassed and decaffeinated left, it is the ex-left, it is the right.

They say that Sandino can be interpreted indiscriminately, but Sandino (history) also judges us. We can't be so generous with the qualification Sandinista because it is the patrimony of Sandino's real followers. They can be respectable sympathizers but not Sandinistas. Because in Sandino's time there were also sympathizers on the plain -- with whom Sandino always maintained a correct communication -- who told him that his struggle was very noble but not

viable; that his patriotism was beyond doubt but that his vocabulary was too shrill and did not inspire confidence among other sectors and governments; that his struggle was very courageous but such insistence on the total withdrawal of foreign supervisors was unrealistic; that he had to adjust to new times and take part in that supervised institutional framework.

With courtesy, conscience and heart Sandino said NO --just as Sandinismo must now say "no" to the new orthodoxy of the right (which says it is not right-wing), to the new fundamentalism (that says it is not ideology), or to the capitulatory and decaffeinated left and to all those who dictate (or accept the dictate) that we have to resign ourselves to live under neoliberal imperialism accepting the commercialization of politics and morals. NO to those who repeat that there is no possibility of struggling against the world right enthroned in power, that we have to give up parcels of our homeland, that there is no longer in the world any other type of economy or politics, and finally one must stop thinking and struggling.

But Sandino never gave up thinking and struggling and to do so in a radical manner if opponents forced him to. And Sandino had no fear of the word radical. Radical means to be rational and direct in the search for social peace; it means to go to the roots of a problem and not just deal with symptoms. Sandino knew that in the struggle against injustice one cannot be moderate. That's why Sandinismo has a radical agenda, in the deepest, most humanist and most committed sense of the word.

Sandinismo means an ongoing, creative, and dynamic reappropriation of Sandino's ethical socialism. Sandinismo means innovation through articulation of new ideas, not renovation through reimposing old ideas of the right.

Sandino means believing in men and women as individuals, and not the conquest of masses or the electorate. It signifies moral compulsion and not yielding to electoral pressure. It means to be like the General who loved Nicaragua so much that he wanted neither to be President, nor minister nor deputy. It means being able to say "no" to privileges but also "no" to the privileged. It means to belong with pride to the left, the source of so much of the humanist thought in modern history. It means being in solidarity with those suffering in whatever corner of the world, in Cuba, Chiapas, Chechnya, and Bosnia.

Sandinismo means the right of our children to share in Sandino's dream, the right to imagine ourselves a new country without hunger and misery, without intervention, as Sandino had imagined.

For when all is said and done, the day when we stop dreaming, cease having faith in the building of this dignified alternative, the day in which we allow a new generation to forget Sandino, is the day that the alternative of dignity will no longer exist.

NO Sen~ores, this is not the discourse of the eighties; it's today's and tomorrow's. It is Sandino's.

Translator's Notes:

(1) Augusto Cesar Sandino is Nicaragua's national hero. From 1927 he led a six-year armed struggle against US marines occupying his country and local forces supporting the US intervention. Sandino was assassinated in 1934 on orders of General Anastasio Somoza. The FSLN (Sandinista National Liberation Front) takes his name.

May 18, 1995 is the 100th Anniversary of Sandino's birth. Nation-wide events are being organized to commemorate this centennial. The February 21 meeting in the Olaf Palme Convention Center was organized by the FSLN as part of a broader range of activities to culminate on May 18. Alejandro Benda~a, author of the book La Mi'stica de Sandino, is a Sandinista leader and historian, former General Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs under the Sandinista government. His speech was given as a contribution to an ideological debate currently underway in Nicaragua regarding the relevance of Sandino's example and ideas to Nicaragua in the centennial year of his birth.

(2) The "crazy little army" is a popular reference to Sandino's Eje'rcito Defensor de la Soberania Nacional de Nicaragua [EDSNN, Army for the Defense of the National Sovereignty of Nicaragua].

(3) One of Sandino's most famous and quoted statements is: "Only the workers and campesinos [peasants] will go all the way to the end."

A SANDINISTA COMMEMORATION OF THE SANDINO CENTENNIAL was translated by Felipe Stuart Courneyeur. It will be published as a bilingual Spanish-English pamphlet by the Managua Centro de Estudios Internacionales (CEI). Further information about the CEI can be obtained by contacting the CEI at Apartado Postal 1747, Managua, Nicaragua. Fax: 505-2-670517. The email address is cei@nicarao.apc.org

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